



WHAT IS GOOD WRITING?

Many students make the mistake of thinking they need to use complex language to convey complex ideas. This is not the case! In most forms of academic writing, your task is to convey knowledge, ideas, arguments, and research to your reader as accurately and clearly as possible. Good writing:

- Knows its **purpose** and **audience**
- Is **clear, concise, and precise**
- Considers its **discipline** and **form**
- Is **logical** and **well-structured**



PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

To ensure logic and clarity, it's important to think about the relationship between the writer (that's you), your audience, and your subject. These elements interact with each other and determine the style, structure, and content of your writing. Ask yourself:

- **Who** am I writing for: Your tutor? Your peers? An imagined audience? What do they already know? What do you need to define or explain? Is jargon appropriate?
- **Why** am I writing for them: To demonstrate knowledge? To make an argument? To convey research findings?
- **What** do I need to communicate to them: What is the key take-away message? What do I hope they will understand by the time they reach the end?



Note: don't always assume your audience is your tutor, even if they're the one marking you. It is often useful to imagine an intelligent, non-specialist as your reader, particularly when making an argument or discussing research results.

CLARITY

Writing with clarity ensures your reader understands exactly what you mean, does not misinterpret your ideas or results, and can follow the logic of your discussion. Some tips include:

- Ensure you understand the main idea you are trying to convey. If not, do more reading, discuss it out loud with someone, or write it as dot points first.
- Avoid generalisations or vagueness: would your reader be able to picture what you mean?
- Use the correct words for the context.
- Consider synonyms carefully, making sure the meaning is appropriate.
- Consider word order and rearrange if necessary. Put related ideas close to each other.

CLEAR	UNCLEAR
The technician demonstrated how to operate the spectrophotometer.	The technician revealed the use of the spectrophotometer.
Early misdiagnosis of childhood thought disorder is a problem.	Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis is a problem.
Nguyen's results contrasted those of ...	Nguyen's results were interesting ...
He has given many lectures to engineers about controlling the flow of gases.	He has given many lectures on controlling the flow of gases to engineers .



CONCISENESS

Conciseness is a skill many students struggle with. This is partly because they believe that complex words and sentences are necessary to write 'academically', and partly because they struggle to express ideas they don't quite understand.

Being concise is a feature of good **editing** as much as it is good writing. You may need several drafts to get your sentences short, sharp, and shiny. Some tips include:

- Express ideas using the **shortest** and **most direct** words and phrases (e.g., 'use' instead of 'utilise').
- Understand what is necessary: delete redundant or meaningless words or phrases.
- Consider your sentence structure: where are your subject and main verb? (see below for more)
- Cut unnecessary repetition; this includes repetition of *meaning*, not just repetition of words.
- Reduce unnecessary adverbs and adjectives (words that describe verbs and nouns) in favour of strong verbs.

CONCISE	UNCONCISE
The authors reject the conclusions.	It was reported that the conclusions were not accepted by the authors.
The researchers used a large cohort of students ...	The researchers utilised a cohort of students which was large in size ...
Fast driving is dangerous.	In my opinion, rapid driving would seem to be very dangerous.
For example, x, y, and z.	For example, x, y, and z, among others .
The research took place over ten days .	The research took place over a period of ten days .
He declared that ...	He loudly and confidently said that ...

PRECISION

Precision is important to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation. Firstly, subtle differences in words can significantly change the meaning of a sentence. Secondly, the more specific your writing is, the clearer and more convincing it will be to your reader. This is particularly important in scientific writing.

- Be as specific as possible: if you know an exact quantity, place, or time, use it.
- Use qualifiers, words that enhance or limit a word, only when necessary.
- Consider jargon (specialised, discipline specific words) use carefully: will your reader understand what you mean?
- Use strong verbs rather than adverbs or nominalisation (see below for more).

PRECISE	IMPRECISE
The managers will meet next month to plan an approach to store management.	A group will meet in the future to discuss options for store management style improvement.
The patient was given 250mgs of calcium carbonate .	The patient was given a large dose of the medication .
Shakespeare uses symbols of nature to convey the blossoming of new love .	Shakespeare uses many poetic techniques to convey love and emotion .
He was furious .	He was quite angry .
The solution was stirred until the precipitate formed .	The solution was stirred.



WRITING TECHNIQUES

There are some basic techniques you can apply to ensure your writing is clear, concise, and precise. Perfecting these will require practice, so don't be afraid of some trial and error. You can always improve by paying close attention to both your own writing and the writing of others.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Understanding the basic elements of a sentence can help keep your writing focussed and on track. This is particularly important for students who struggle with run-on sentences or clearly expressing a single idea.

The most basic sentence includes a **subject** (who or what the sentence is about), a **main verb** (what they are doing), and an **object** (what they are doing it to). Together, these make up a **complete idea**.



Understanding this basic structure will help you determine how to add extra phrases and clauses and why you might need to do so. However, keep in mind that the more you deviate from this basic structure, the more difficult your sentences will be to read!

If you struggle with clarity or conciseness, try to locate the subject and main verb of your sentence. Keep these towards the beginning and check that you are expressing a single, complete, and identifiable idea.

STRONG VERBS VS NOMINALISATION

How we use nouns and verbs can make a big difference in the clarity and precision of our sentences. One technique to ensure clear, precise, and concise writing is to emphasise the main verb/s in the sentence rather than the noun/s.

WHAT IS NOMINALISATION?

Nominalisation is when we turn verbs into nouns, e.g., 'to decide' vs 'decision'. Nominalisation is common in academic writing as it can seem more objective and impersonal; however, it can also make writing dense and difficult to understand. This is because, as readers, we need to be able to identify what is happening in a sentence in order to make sense of an idea.

As 'doing words', verbs help move your sentences forward. Choosing **strong verbs**, those that are specific and descriptive, helps the reader understand what is most important and how it is happening.

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

This is not to say you should replace all nouns with verbs! Too many verbs can make your sentences wordy and create a strange rhythm. Rather, consider when to use a **strong verb** (e.g., as the main verb of your sentence), and when to use nouns. Generally speaking, writing is clearer when the verb precedes the noun/s. Compare the following sentences:

This version uses a lot of nominalisation:

'The most important **aspect** of **clear communication** is the **reduction** of **imprecision** and **wordiness**.'

This version uses mostly verbs:

'The most important aspect of **writing** clearly **is to reduce being** imprecise and wordy.'

This version uses a combination of verbs and nouns:

'To write clearly, it is important to reduce imprecision and wordiness.'



ACTIVE VS PASSIVE VOICE

The active and passive voice are types of sentence constructions that determine how we use verbs and emphasise information in our sentences. We write in the active or passive voice for different reasons, and often this is driven by the **discipline** we are in and the **form** of the writing. For example, the **discipline** of scientific writing commonly uses passive voice to create an impersonal and objective tone. Argumentative or reflective **forms** of writing favour the active voice as it creates a stronger and more direct tone.

Most writing will favour one over the other, but still use a combination. Consider your purpose, form, and discipline when switching between the active and passive voice.

THE ACTIVE VOICE

In the active voice, the subject acts on the verb. For example:

'The authors report that the findings are significant.'

You might use the active voice because:

- It has a clear, direct, and strong tone
- It focuses on who or what performed the action of the sentence
- You want to emphasise an argument or who research belongs to

THE PASSIVE VOICE

In the passive voice, the subject is acted on by the verb. For example:

'The findings were reported to be significant.'

You might use the passive to:

- Focus on the event or object of the sentence rather than who did it
- Make it more impersonal, objective, and authoritative
- Demonstrate how it is unimportant, unknown, or you don't want to reveal who performed the action
- Discuss a general truth, or a claim that may not be a fact

[SEE THE GUIDE ON THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE](#)

PARALLEL STRUCTURE

Creating parallel structure means using the same sequence or construction of words, phrases, or clauses in sentences. This helps the reader follow the flow of your writing and see connections between ideas. It also ensures the same level of importance is given to multiple ideas within a sentence.

To achieve a parallel structure, conjugate verbs in the same way when describing a list or comparing information and ensure consistency across voice (e.g., active vs passive) and tense. For example:

PARALLEL STRUCTURE	UNPARALLEL STRUCTURE
The nurse told the patient to take her medication, do daily exercise, and get plenty of rest.	The nurse told the patient to take her medication, exercising is important, and that she should sleep well.
Studying processes and investigating problems will provide more useful risk assessment data.	To study processes and investigating problems will provide more useful risk assessment data.
First , this essay analyses ...; Second , it describes ...; Finally , it examines ...	Firstly , this essay analyses ...; Then , it will be discussing ... The results will finally be examined ...



This does not mean every sentence should be constructed the same way! This risks making your writing flat and uninteresting. Use parallelisms to create clarity and grammatical constancy.